

Development begins in the home...

A new approach to rural development in Colombia

The mountainous Eastern Cundinamarca region of Colombia is one of the poorest regions of the country. Its largely rural people are mainly small-scale subsistence farmers, growing corn and potatoes, and perhaps tending a few cattle, pigs or poultry. The average family size, according to a 1971 survey, is 7.5; yet 40 percent of the houses have only two rooms (which are often shared with the livestock) and almost 80 percent have no sanitary facilities or water supply. Some 60 percent of the population have attended only primary school—all the region's 18 secondary schools are in the towns. Almost 60 percent of the population is under 20 years old.

This is the area in which the Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA), in cooperation with the IDRC, has been carrying out an innovative rural development program since 1971. Although the primary aim of the project is to generate income-producing programs, household management—covering such factors as health, nutrition, sanitation, housing and education—has been an important aspect since the beginning. This part of the program is now entering a new and successful phase, but there were some obstacles to be overcome along the way.



The above article is based on a report by project staff Lelia Cruz, Elizabeth Shipley and Kenneth Swanberg that originally appeared in Spanish in 'CIID Informa'.

Photos: Jaime Rojas

In the early stages of the project the household management group attempted three initiatives: sewing and handicrafts instruction, a housing expansion and improvements program, and discussion groups on health, nutrition and family planning. Early enthusiasm among the people soon waned, however, mainly as a result of lack of markets for handicrafts, lack of expertise and credit for housing, and lack of interest in discussion groups. So in 1972 the group went back to basics and surveyed the peasant families to find out what were their priorities.

Ironically, handicrafts and home improvements emerged at the top of the list. However, in the course of the survey researchers observed a good deal of malnutrition among the peasant people. Since food and nutrition also ranked high on the people's list of priorities and this was obviously an urgent need, it was decided to concentrate on this aspect as the one which the household management group was best equipped to tackle.

A study of the eating habits of 259 families showed that, while malnutrition was more severe among lower-income families, consumption of essential calcium and vitamin A nutrients was generally deficient, and bore little relationship to family income.

As a direct result of these findings two pilot pre-school centres were established early in 1974 with the cooperation of local teachers—one in a low income district and one in a higher income district. Here, twice a week for two hours, the pre-schoolers learned what school was all about (and enjoyed a high-protein meal) while their parents attended courses in nutrition.

The results at the end of the year were impressive. At the start children from low income homes were shy and apathetic, in sharp contrast to the children at the other centre. Yet by the end of the experiment the two groups had attained almost the same level. One first-grade teacher observed that the four children in her class who had attended the pilot centre were more alert, mature and active; they adjusted more easily, and became "star pupils" in the class.

The parents were equally enthusiastic, and in response to their demand for more pre-school facilities, eleven centres have been set up in the low income areas, each catering to 15 children. The centres are staffed by girls from the neighbourhood who have been trained for the job. Each centre has the same objectives: to provide the child a variety of mental, physical and interpersonal stimuli; to include nutritional components in the



The pre-school centres are under the direction of local girls. In addition to classroom activities, all the children receive a high-protein meal of mixed vegetables.

children's meals; and to offer parents educational courses in nutrition.

It is perhaps significant that the National Department of Planning, on learning of the results attained in the pilot centres, approached the ICA and offered to finance both the initial training period, and the first full year of operation. An evaluation system is now in preparation to follow up on the future progress of each child.

The centres will also provide a base for further research on the effects of malnutrition and how they can be avoided. Through careful analysis of the children at each centre researchers hope to establish whether or not there is a link between vitamin A deficiency and a child's visual inattentiveness or lack of concentration. A positive result would at least partly explain slow learning in primary school, and if the deficiency should prove reversible in a short period, the supply of vitamin A supplement could become a key activity within rural development programs.

The study on family nutrition also led to another study that has produced some surprising preliminary results. Using the data obtained the project's researchers have calculated that the average family could obtain the minimum basic nutritional requirements at a cost of approximately half what they are presently spending per capita per day, simply by reorganizing their diet. Although the researchers are still cautious, they admit the results are encouraging, and if borne out in future studies can only lead to the conclusion that a proper nutritious diet is within the reach of the poor without prior need for an increased income.

Perhaps most encouraging of all, however, is the enthusiasm of the people themselves for the household management program once its objectives became clear. It is this enthusiasm that has led to the program becoming a truly relevant part of the overall project.